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UNCLAS KATHMANDU 000914

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DS/OP/NEA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PTER ASEC BEXP CASC NP

SUBJECT: SUSPECTED MAOISTS DESTROY PEPSI TRUCK

REF: KATHMANDU 747 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Suspected Maoist insurgents set fire to a Pepsi-Cola truck making deliveries in Dolakha District, about 70 km east of Kathmandu the evening of May 7. According to Rajiv Sant, Managing Director for the Indian-owned Pepsi franchise in Nepal, three gunmen stopped the truck and ordered the driver, salesman, and distributor to get out. After robbing them, Sant said the gunmen told the three Pepsi employees that "we don't want American companies here." One of the gunmen then reportedly blew a whistle, at which point a number of young men emerged from the surrounding forest. The group then drove the truck off, leaving the three Pepsi employees to walk to the next town. The three gunmen, meanwhile, "calmly walked off into the jungle," according to Sant.

¶2. (SBU) Sant said he contacted the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) Battalion with responsibility for the area for assistance in locating the truck the next day. The RNA found the vehicle about four km from the site of the hijacking. It had been set on fire, completely damaging its cab and electrical panels. Sant said he had been trying to keep the incident out of the press to avoid undue publicity (an unsuccessful effort; the vernacular press carried a short story on the event May 9). He views the incident as a warning, and is assessing how it may affect the franchise's operations in Nepal. He will visit the Embassy May 10 to discuss the matter further.

¶3. (SBU) An Amcit university professor who has been a frequent visitor to Nepal over the past decade told conoff a Sherpa guide he knows and trusts had recently encountered a group of Maoists on the road from Jiri (also in Dolokha District). As the guide proceeded on the trail from Jiri to Lukla, the entry point by air for Everest Base Camp, he said he met another group of 15 armed Maoists at Nuntala, Solukhumbu District, who warned him "not to take any Americans up" as trekking clients and forced him to listen to a lengthy tirade of propaganda.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: That the Pepsi franchise in Nepal is not owned by Americans is a distinction apparently lost on the insurgents. Although Coca-Cola facilities have been attacked three times within the past year, this is the first attack on Pepsi property that we know of; althogether the attacks have taken place in three different districts of the country. Like the Coca-Cola attacks, only company property--rather than people--were targeted, and the same anti-American message given (Reftel). One of the more bizarre elements of the Nepali Maoists' published precepts is opposition to soft drink companies. The reported warnings given to the Sherpa guide are also a matter of concern. The EAC will meet May 10 to review the overall security situation.

MALINOWSKI